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Contesting the Shift in Historical Epistemic Authority in the Algorithmic Age

Ucheoma C Osuji

Department of Philosophy, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

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Corresponding Author: Ucheoma C Osuji

Abstract

For most of recorded history, we have trusted a small, identifiable circle of people to tell us what happened: archivists, historians, editors, librarians. We could ask who they were, how they worked, and why they deserved our trust. That circle is quietly being replaced. Today, a search engine's ranking, a recommendation algorithm, or a generative AI system increasingly decides which version of the past reaches us first and most of us never see, let alone question, the reasoning behind that choice. This study asks a simple but urgent question: when a machine becomes our most frequent source of historical knowledge, what happens to the trust historical authority was built on? Philosophers have long argued that trusting another person's judgment is only rational when we have grounds to believe they are conscientious and reliable. Algorithmic systems complicate that bargain. They are fast, confident, and everywhere —

but often opaque even to the people who built them, and shaped by commercial incentives that have nothing to do with truth. The result is not necessarily worse information, but a different, less visible chain of custody between the past and the present showing one the public has had little say in designing. This research combines philosophy of history, epistemology, and science and technology studies to map how historical authority is being renegotiated in real time, and to propose concrete standards of transparency, accountability, and public participation, that algorithmic systems handling historical knowledge should be expected to meet. The stakes are not abstract. A society that no longer knows who or what is telling it about its own past is a society that has lost a basic form of self-understanding. This project aims to help recover it.

Keywords: History, Epistemic Authority, Algorithmic Authority, Datafication, Hyper- History

Introduction

Historical knowledge has always depended on trusted intermediaries — archivists who decide what is preserved, editors who decide what is published, and historians who decide what counts as evidence (Floridi, 2014, p. 4). Floridi (2014) describes this as the defining feature of "historical" societies: their dependence on information and communication technologies (ICTs) to record, transmit, and interpret the past (p. 4). In recent decades, however, a further threshold has been crossed. Floridi (2016) ^[4] calls this threshold "hyperhistory" — a condition in which societal well-being is not merely related to but *dependent on* the automated management of information (p. 3). Search algorithms, recommendation systems, and generative AI now mediate a growing share of the public's encounter with the past, often without the user's awareness of how a given account was selected, ranked, or generated (Suchman, 2020, pp. 175–187; Shin, 2025, p. 1) ^[15, 14]. This shift raises a foundational epistemological problem. Zagzebski (2012) ^[16] argues that trusting another person's judgment is only rational when the truster has grounds to regard that source as conscientious and reliable (p. 105). Algorithmic systems disrupt this warrant structure: they are frequently opaque even to their own designers, and their outputs are shaped by commercial and engagement-driven incentives rather than by a demonstrable commitment to truth (Rogers, 2013, p. 119; Fricker, 2007) ^[13, 5]. The result is not simply a technological change but a quiet redistribution of *epistemic authority* over the historical record — one that has occurred with little public deliberation or institutional oversight.

The aim of this study is to critically examine how historical epistemic authority is being contested, reconfigured, and redistributed in the algorithmic age, and to develop normative criteria by which algorithmic systems that mediate historical knowledge can be assessed and held accountable. To trace the conceptual evolution of epistemic authority from traditional historiographical institutions to algorithmically mediated knowledge systems. The specific objectives of the study include the following: (i) To analyze the specific mechanisms — ranking, curation, generative synthesis — through which algorithmic

systems produce and confer historical authority (Suchman, 2020, pp. 175–187) ^[15]. (ii) To evaluate whether algorithmic systems can satisfy established philosophical conditions for legitimate epistemic authority (Zagzebski, 2012, pp. 3, 105) ^[16]. (iii) To identify the risks that algorithmic mediation poses to epistemic justice in historical knowledge production (Fricker, 2007) ^[5]. (iv) To propose actionable standards of transparency, accountability, and public participation for algorithmic systems that mediate historical knowledge. The research questions include How has the locus of historical epistemic authority shifted from traditional custodial institutions to algorithmic systems? Do algorithmic systems meet the philosophical conditions required to function as legitimate epistemic authorities, or do they merely simulate the social signals of authority? What forms of epistemic injustice, if any, are produced or exacerbated by algorithmic mediation of historical knowledge (Fricker, 2007) ^[5]? What normative standards should govern algorithmic systems that shape public access to historical knowledge?

This thesis argues that the algorithmic age has not eliminated the need for epistemic authority in historical knowledge, it has relocated and disguised it. Where historical authority was once vested in identifiable, accountable institutions, it is increasingly exercised by opaque, commercially motivated systems that project the *appearance* of authority (through speed, confidence, and prominence) without satisfying the underlying conditions of conscientious reliability that genuine epistemic authority requires (Zagzebski, 2012, p. 105) ^[16]. Drawing on Enroth's (2021) contention that the so-called crisis of truth is "epiphenomenal to a more general crisis of authority" that is political before it is epistemological (p. 1), this thesis further argues that the problem cannot be resolved through technical fixes alone (e.g., improved fact-checking algorithms); it requires a reconstruction of the political and institutional conditions under which historical authority is granted, contested, and legitimated.

This study is justified by the scale and speed of the transition it examines. Algorithmically mediated platforms have become a primary point of entry into historical information for a majority of users, yet the philosophical and historiographical literature has been slow to theorize the epistemic consequences of this shift (Shin, 2025, p. 1) ^[14]. Existing work on epistemic authority (Zagzebski, 2012) ^[16] and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) ^[5] provides a robust normative vocabulary, but has not yet been systematically applied to the specific case of historical knowledge under algorithmic conditions. This study fills that gap by bringing together philosophy of history, social epistemology, and science and technology studies (STS) in a single analytic framework. The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it extends existing accounts of epistemic authority (Zagzebski, 2012) ^[16] and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) ^[5] into a domain — historical knowledge — that has been underexamined in the algorithmic-authority literature, which has focused chiefly on news and political misinformation (Rogers, 2013, p. 119 ^[13]; Enroth, 2021, p. 1). Practically, the study's proposed standards for transparency and accountability can inform policy debates around AI governance, platform regulation, and the preservation of public trust in historical knowledge — a matter with direct implications for civic life, education, and collective memory.

This study is positioned as a foundational inquiry that can be extended in several directions. Future research could pursue empirical audits of specific algorithmic systems' historical outputs, following methodologies used in recent studies of AI-generated encyclopedic content (Shin, 2025, p. 1) ^[14]. It could also inform comparative cross-jurisdictional policy analysis, examining how different regulatory regimes are beginning to address algorithmic accountability in knowledge platforms. Finally, the normative framework developed here could be adapted into practical auditing tools for archivists, educators, and platform designers seeking to evaluate the epistemic reliability of algorithmic systems before they are deployed in public-facing historical or educational contexts.

The research further clarifies key concepts such as epistemic authority, algorithmic mediation, digital testimony, epistemic trust, and knowledge democratization. This study reviews the existing scholarship bearing on the relationship between historical knowledge, epistemic authority, and algorithmic mediation. It is organized thematically rather than chronologically, moving from (i) the historiographical and philosophical foundations of epistemic authority, through (ii) the informational/infrastructural turn associated with hyperhistory, to (iii) emerging work on digital and algorithmic epistemology, before (iv) identifying the specific gaps this study addresses. Historical knowledge has classically depended on identifiable custodial institutions — archives, universities, editorial boards; whose authority rested on traceable expertise and accountability (Floridi, 2014, p. 4). Osuji (2017) ^[7] examines this custodial model from within philosophy of history itself, arguing that historical explanation and narrative are shaped by probabilistic and methodological constraints that require careful epistemic scrutiny of how historical claims are justified (Osuji, 2017, pp. 155–179) ^[7]. This work is significant for the present study because it establishes, from within African philosophical scholarship, that historical justification has never been epistemically neutral or self-evident — a foundation this thesis extends into the algorithmic domain. Zagzebski (2012) ^[16] supplies the general philosophical architecture for evaluating any claim to authority over belief, arguing that trust in another's judgment is rational only when grounded in a defensible assessment of that source's conscientiousness and reliability (p. 105). This model, developed prior to the mass deployment of algorithmic knowledge systems, nonetheless provides the normative benchmark against which newer, non-human claimants to epistemic authority must be measured.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts a tripartite theoretical framework, integrating: Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] Theory of Epistemic Authority is used as the primary normative benchmark for evaluating whether, and under what conditions, an algorithmic system can legitimately be trusted as a source of historical knowledge (pp. 3, 105). Fricker's (2007) ^[5] Theory of Epistemic Injustice is used to analyze the distributive and representational harms that may arise when algorithmic systems privilege certain historical narratives, sources, or communities of knowers over others. Floridi's (2014, 2016 ^[4]) Philosophy of Hyperhistory which is used as the descriptive/infrastructural frame establishing *why* and *how* the informational conditions of historical knowledge

production have changed, providing the empirical backdrop against which the normative (Zagzebski) and justice-based (Fricker) analyses are applied.

Osuji's (2026) ^[11] concept of a "paradigm shift" in knowledge production and justification functions as an integrating thread across the three frameworks, since it names precisely the phenomenon this thesis investigates: not merely a change in the tools of historical knowledge production, but a contested transformation in the *standards of justification* themselves (Osuji, 2026, pp. 1–24) ^[11]. This study employs a critical conceptual analysis, combining conceptual analysis, critical case analysis, and normative synthesis: Conceptual analysis clarifies and interrelates the key terms including historical epistemic authority, hyperhistory, algorithmic authority, and epistemic injustice; drawing primarily on Floridi (2014, 2016 ^[4]), Zagzebski (2012) ^[16], and Osuji (2026) ^[11]. Critical case analysis examines specific instances of algorithmically mediated historical knowledge (e.g., AI-generated historical summaries, search-engine ranking of historical sources, automated encyclopedic content), following the case-based critical method modeled by Suchman (2020, pp. 175–187) ^[15]. Normative synthesis applies the tripartite theoretical framework to the cases examined, in order to derive accountability criteria for algorithmic systems that mediate historical knowledge. Data sources are secondary and textual: published scholarship, publicly available algorithmic outputs, and documented case studies, consistent with standard practice in philosophical and STS-informed inquiry (Shin, 2025; Suchman, 2020) ^[14, 15].

The Constitution of Epistemic Authority in Human history

Epistemology has traditionally asked: What is knowledge? What justifies belief? Who has authority to determine truth? Knowledge can be objective, universal certain, stable and acquired through human reason (Osuji, 2026: 129) ^[11]. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It studies the nature and possibility, as well as the scope and limits of human knowledge; how knowledge is acquired and perceived. Epistemology inquiries into knowledge related notions such as perception, certainty, memory, proof, evidence, and belief (Jimoh, 2012:51). It deals primarily with the definition of Knowledge and concepts related to knowledge. It attains to the criterion needed to attain genuine knowledge, sources of knowledge and kinds of knowledge the degree of certainty of various kinds of relationship between the knowing subject and object of cognition (Osuji, 2026: 129) ^[11].

In pre-modern contexts, knowledge was often authorized by divine revelation, monarchy, or tradition. For example, in medieval Europe, institutions like the Roman Catholic Church functioned as primary arbiters of truth, grounding knowledge in theological doctrine. Modernity fundamentally reconfigures the grounds upon which authority and credibility in knowledge production are established. Where traditional societies often grounded authority in sacred order, lineage, or metaphysical hierarchy, modernity relocates legitimacy to reason, method, and institutional validation. Modernity, however, inaugurates what Immanuel Kant famously called humanity's "emergence from self-imposed immaturity." In his essay *What Is Enlightenment?*, Kant argues that individuals must dare to use their own reason (*sapere aude*). Authority shifts

from external tradition to autonomous rational inquiry. Medieval traditional authority rooted in revelation and hierarchy is displaced by rational self-legislation. Modernity privileges methodological skepticism and empirical validation. Thinkers like René Descartes introduce systematic doubt, while Francis Bacon advances inductive experimentation as the foundation of reliable knowledge. Knowledge becomes credible not because it is ancient or sacred, but because it is empirically testable, replicable and subject to peer scrutiny. Tradition loses epistemic privilege; credibility becomes procedural rather than inherited.

Modernity creates new sites of epistemic authority:¹ Max Weber describes this as rationalization which is the organization of social life according to calculable rules and technical expertise. The challenge here is that authority becomes technocratic and institutional rather than communal and customary, thus leading to institutionalization and bureaucratization of knowledge. Weber also describes modernity as an age of "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*). Knowledge no longer depends on mythic or cosmological narratives but on causal explanation. This is an instance of secularization and disenchantment of knowledge. Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche declares the "death of God," signaling not literal atheism alone but the collapse of absolute metaphysical foundations. Transcendent guarantees of truth are replaced with human-centered, provisional frameworks.

Late modern and postmodern thinkers complicate modern authority itself. Michel Foucault argues that knowledge is intertwined with power; institutions that claim objectivity also produce regimes of truth. Likewise, Jean-François Lyotard critiques "grand narratives" of progress and emancipation in *The Postmodern Condition*. Modern authority is itself destabilized — expertise and scientific objectivity are interrogated as historically situated and politically embedded. Modernity, especially in its digital and late-capitalist phase, expands access to knowledge production. The internet, social media, and open-access scholarship blur the boundary between expert and layperson. While this democratizes knowledge, it also produces: Epistemic fragmentation, Crisis of expertise and Competing truth claims. The paradox here is that credibility becomes contested in a plural epistemic landscape. Yet modernity does not simply abolish authority, it reconstructs it on procedural, methodological, and institutional grounds. Modernity transforms authority in knowledge production from inherited legitimacy to constructed credibility. Yet this transformation remains unstable. As modern institutions face crises of trust, the question re-emerges: On what grounds should knowledge be believed? This question remains central to contemporary philosophy of knowledge, political epistemology, and critical theory in this digital age.

Conceptions of Epistemic authority

Epistemic Authority refers to the recognized right or credibility of an individual, institution, or body to be trusted as a reliable source of knowledge within a specific domain. It concerns *who is justified in being believed* and *why*. It is defined as the socially recognized legitimacy to generate,

¹ Modern sites of epistemic shifts include universities, laboratories, journals, and research institutes. Authority shifts from: (i) Elders → Experts (ii) Clergy → Scientists (iii) Oral transmission → Peer-reviewed publication.

interpret, and validate knowledge. In epistemology, the concept arises from the recognition that much of what we know is not acquired through direct personal investigation but through testimony, that is, through reliance on others' expertise (Audi, 2011). Because knowledge is socially distributed, societies establish structures of epistemic authority to regulate trust, credibility, and justification. There are specific characteristics of epistemic authority, one is expertise. An epistemic authority possesses specialized knowledge, training, or competence in a given field. For example, scientists function as epistemic authorities in empirical research because of methodological training and peer review processes (Goldman, 1999). Epistemic authority depends on rational trust. Trust is not blind belief but justified reliance grounded in evidence of competence and reliability (Hardwig, 1985). Institutions such as universities, courts, or medical councils formally confer epistemic authority. Authority is not merely personal expertise; it is socially acknowledged competence. Epistemic authority is limited to particular areas. A medical doctor may be an authority in medicine but not necessarily in constitutional law.

There are philosophical foundations to epistemic authority such as testimony and social epistemology. Much of contemporary discussion arises from social epistemology. Hardwig (1985) argues that modern knowledge systems (e.g., science) require epistemic dependence because no individual can independently verify all claims. Thus, epistemic authority becomes indispensable in complex societies. There is epistemic dependence. Goldman (1999) emphasizes that rational agents must evaluate experts based on indicators such as credentials, track records, consensus, and argumentative strength. Michel Foucault complicates epistemic authority by arguing that knowledge is intertwined with power structures (Foucault, 1980). Institutions that claim authority may also shape what counts as knowledge. This means there are different types² of epistemic authority. The digital era has destabilized traditional epistemic authorities. Online platforms enable rapid dissemination of unverified claims, weakening institutional trust. Excessive deference to authority may undermine intellectual autonomy. Kantian traditions emphasize the importance of critical reflection rather than passive acceptance.

Floridi (2014, 2016^[4]) reframes the historical/non-historical distinction as a matter of a society's *dependence* on information and communication technologies, introducing "hyperhistory" to describe societies whose well-being is now inseparable from automated information management (Floridi, 2016, p. 3)^[4]. This literature is foundational but descriptive: Floridi documents the shift in the *infrastructure* of knowledge without fully theorizing its consequences for *epistemic justification* — a limitation noted by Byron (2010)^[2], who argues that Floridi's ontology-centered framework

risks displacing established ethical and epistemic vocabulary rather than integrating with it (pp. 135–147).

A growing body of scholarship has begun to address the justificatory consequences of algorithmic knowledge mediation directly. Osuji's (2026)^[11] recent contribution, *"Digital Epistemology: Contesting the Paradigm Shift in Knowledge Production and Justification in the Algorithmic Age,"* published in the *Journal of Peoples and World-views* (1(2), pp. 1–24), is directly relevant here: it argues that the algorithmic age has produced a paradigm shift not merely in *how* knowledge is produced but in *how it is justified* — contesting the assumption that traditional standards of epistemic warrant transfer smoothly onto machine-mediated knowledge production (Osuji, 2026, pp. 1–24)^[11]. This work is significant because it is among the first to apply African philosophical epistemology directly to the algorithmic-knowledge debate, offering a standpoint largely absent from the Euro-American-dominated literature on algorithmic authority. This concern is echoed from different disciplinary angles. Suchman (2020)^[15] demonstrates, through the case of automated military targeting, that algorithmic systems do not merely process pre-existing "accurate" information but actively reconstruct the standards by which accuracy itself is judged (pp. 175–187). Shin (2025)^[14] extends this into a general theory of "algorithmic truth," arguing that truth-validation is increasingly an infrastructural, sociotechnical output rather than a product of dialogic or institutional deliberation (p. 1). Rogers (2013)^[13] names the resulting social phenomenon "algorithmic authority"; public trust in the epistemic value of search-engine ranking, independent of any demonstrated reliability (p. 119).

The Information Turn: Hyper-History and Infrastructural Knowledge

Fricker's (2007)^[5] concept of epistemic injustice — the systematic underestimation or exclusion of certain knowers' credibility — has been extended into digital contexts by scholars examining algorithmic curation, who argue that automated systems can amplify majority perspectives while marginalizing others (as discussed in relation to Stewart *et al.*, 2022, and Fricker's framework in recent digital-public-sphere scholarship). This literature establishes that algorithmic epistemic authority is not simply a question of accuracy but of justice; this is a dimension largely absent from Floridi's infrastructural account. Enroth (2021) offers a corrective that reframes the entire debate: he argues that the so-called crisis of truth in digital society is "epiphenomenal to a more general crisis of authority" that is fundamentally political rather than epistemological (p. 1). This literature cautions against treating algorithmic mediation as a purely technical epistemology problem solvable through better verification tools, and instead insists on its institutional and political dimensions. Several clear gaps emerge from this review:

Domain gap: Existing algorithmic-authority scholarship (Rogers, 2013; Shin, 2025; Suchman, 2020)^[13, 14, 15] concentrates chiefly on news, military targeting, and general knowledge production. Historical knowledge specifically — its custodial traditions, its evidentiary standards, its role in collective memory — remains comparatively underexamined as a site of algorithmic epistemic contestation.

² Expert Authority – Grounded in technical competence (e.g., scientists, physicians). Institutional Authority – Derived from recognized structures (e.g., courts, universities). Moral or Normative Authority – Related to ethical or value-based guidance (e.g., religious leaders). Democratic or Public Authority – Collective deliberative legitimacy (e.g., public commissions).

Normative gap: Floridi's (2014, 2016 ^[4]) infrastructural account of hyperhistory describes the shift in the *medium* of knowledge but does not systematically apply Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] normative conditions for legitimate epistemic authority to determine whether algorithmic systems actually satisfy them.

Justice gap: Fricker's (2007) ^[5] epistemic injustice framework has been applied to algorithmic curation in general contexts but has not been systematically extended to the specific injustices that may arise when historical narratives — particularly those of marginalized or non-Western communities — are algorithmically filtered, ranked, or generated.

Geographic/epistemic gap: With the exception of Osuji's (2026) ^[11] recent intervention, the literature on digital and algorithmic epistemology remains disproportionately shaped by Euro-American philosophical traditions and case studies (e.g., U.S. military AI, Western search engines), leaving underexplored how algorithmic epistemic authority operates on, and is contested by, non-Western knowledge systems and historiographical traditions.

Political-institutional gap: Enroth's (2021) argument that the crisis is political before it is epistemological has not yet been translated into concrete institutional or policy criteria specific to historical knowledge platforms, leaving a gap between diagnosis and actionable remedy.

This study addresses these gaps by (a) focusing specifically on historical knowledge as a domain of algorithmic epistemic contestation, (b) systematically testing algorithmic systems against Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] normative conditions for authority, (c) extending Fricker's (2007) ^[5] epistemic injustice framework to historical narrative production, and (d) incorporating Osuji's (2026) ^[11] paradigm-shift framework to ensure the analysis is not confined to a single geographic or philosophical tradition.

Epistemic Authority, Credibility and Knowledge in a Networked Age

Digital epistemology examines how digital technologies transform the production, circulation, validation, and contestation of knowledge. While classical epistemology focused on justification, truth, and belief within relatively stable institutional frameworks, the digital age introduces new mediating structures such as algorithms, platforms, data infrastructures, and networked publics that fundamentally reshape epistemic authority. Modern knowledge production was historically anchored in institutional gatekeeping—universities, journals, and disciplinary expertise. However, digital platforms redistribute epistemic participation beyond traditional boundaries. As Jürgen Habermas argues in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the legitimacy of knowledge depends on communicative rationality within public discourse (Habermas 1962, 89). In digital environments, however, discourse is fragmented, accelerated, and platform-mediated.

The Shift in Epistemic Authority

Modern knowledge systems relied on peer review, disciplinary expertise, and academic credentials. Digital platforms displace these mechanisms with metrics—likes, shares, impressions, engagement rates. The digital age introduces a new epistemic condition in which algorithms, platforms, and data infrastructures mediate visibility, credibility, and belief formation. Authority becomes

algorithmic when:

- Visibility is automated (1)
- Credibility is quantified (2)
- Attention is commodified (3)

This marks a transition from epistemic meritocracy to infrastructural governance. Digital platforms structure epistemic environments through personalization and engagement optimization. Algorithmic systems determine:

- What information appears (i)
- Which voices gain amplification (ii)
- What becomes trending or marginalized (iii)

Visibility becomes a primary marker of credibility (1, 2). Yet visibility is not neutral; it is economically incentivized. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is reconfigured as algorithmic governance in this instance (ii) above. The regime of truth is embedded in code rather than doctrine. (3) (iii) Algorithmic systems operate as epistemic gatekeepers. They determine which news stories trend, which research gains public attention, and which voices are amplified unlike editorial boards, algorithms lack public accountability. Their criteria remain opaque. Even though it might be argued that algorithmic personalization enhances epistemic efficiency by tailoring information to user interests. From this perspective, algorithmic filtering reduces cognitive overload yet efficiency does not equal epistemic legitimacy. Personalized filtering can create echo chambers, reinforcing prior beliefs rather than exposing users to diverse perspectives. The epistemological problem here is algorithmic mediation risks epistemic fragmentation rather than rational deliberation. Authority no longer rests solely on institutional credentials but increasingly on visibility, virality, and algorithmic amplification. Credibility becomes relational and data-driven rather than strictly peer-reviewed. Thus, digital epistemology challenges modern institutional authority by introducing distributed validation systems such as 'likes,' 'shares,' metrics, and algorithmic rankings.

Digital knowledge is filtered through algorithmic systems that structure attention and determine visibility. Shoshana Zuboff argues that surveillance capitalism converts human experience into behavioral data, shaping both economic and epistemic environments (Zuboff 2019, 94). Algorithms do not merely organize information; they curate and prioritize it, subtly shaping what counts as relevant or credible knowledge. Similarly, Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge provides a framework for understanding digital infrastructures as regimes that produce truth rather than neutrally transmit it (Foucault 1977, 27). In the digital context, epistemic authority becomes embedded in code, platform architecture, and proprietary algorithms. Consequently, digital epistemology reveals that credibility is technologically mediated and politically structured.

Digital media democratize knowledge production by lowering barriers to publication and participation.³ Alvin Goldman emphasizes that reliable knowledge depends on trustworthy expert systems (Goldman 1999, 4). Yet digital environments blur distinctions between expert and non-

³ Blogs, podcasts, and social platforms enable marginalized voices to enter public discourse. However, this democratization generates epistemic instability.

expert, creating what some scholars describe as “epistemic flattening.” The proliferation of misinformation demonstrates this tension. According to Daniel Kahneman (2011, 80), cognitive biases influence how individuals process information, often privileging emotionally resonant content over evidence-based claims. Digital platforms amplify such tendencies through engagement-based algorithms. Thus, while digital epistemology expands participation, it simultaneously destabilizes traditional markers of credibility.

Despite these challenges, digital epistemology also enables novel forms of collaborative knowledge. Pierre Lévy (1997: 13) conceptualizes cyberspace as a site of “collective intelligence,” where distributed cognition enhances problem-solving capacities. Open-source projects and collaborative databases illustrate how knowledge can emerge from decentralized networks rather than hierarchical institutions. However, as Byung-Chul Han warns, digital transparency can produce “infocracy,” where information abundance undermines deliberative depth (Han 2022, 41). The sheer volume of data does not guarantee epistemic quality. Digital epistemology therefore navigates a paradox: the same technologies that empower distributed knowledge also risk epistemic fragmentation. Another defining feature of digital epistemology is datafication. This is the transformation of social reality into quantifiable data. Metrics, analytics, and predictive models increasingly function as arbiters of truth. Floridi (2014: 40) argues that data-driven systems create new ontological conditions in which reality is interpreted computationally. Predictive algorithms in governance, economics, and health care shape not only decision-making but epistemic norms themselves. Here, authority shifts from discursive reasoning to statistical probability. Credibility becomes equated with computational output rather than argumentative justification.

Is AI as Epistemic Agent?

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly machine learning and generative systems, has transformed contemporary epistemic environments. AI systems now retrieve, classify, recommend, predict, and generate knowledge-like outputs at unprecedented scale. Systems developed by OpenAI, search engines such as Google, and recommendation infrastructures embedded in YouTube and TikTok function not merely as tools but as epistemic mediators. This development raises a foundational philosophical question: Can AI be considered an epistemic agent? If epistemic agency involves the capacity to generate, evaluate, justify, and transmit knowledge, does AI meet these criteria? Or is it merely an epistemic instrument embedded within human cognitive systems? An epistemic agent is typically understood as an entity capable of forming beliefs, justifying beliefs, evaluating evidence, revising beliefs in light of new information and bearing epistemic responsibility. Traditional epistemology assumes that epistemic agents are rational human subjects. However, social epistemology complicates this assumption by recognizing collective agents (e.g., scientific communities) as epistemic entities (Goldman, 1999). The question, then, is whether AI systems satisfy the conditions for epistemic agency or whether they simulate epistemic processes without genuine epistemic standing.

The instrumentalist position maintains that AI systems are epistemic tools rather than agents. On this view: (i) AI lacks

consciousness and intentionality. (ii) AI does not possess beliefs but processes statistical correlations. (iii) AI cannot bear epistemic responsibility. Floridi (2011) argues that information-processing systems operate within an informational environment but do not necessarily possess intrinsic epistemic agency. Instead, epistemic agency remains attributable to human designers, operators, and users. From this perspective, AI extends human epistemic capacity but does not independently qualify as an epistemic subject. An alternative view emphasizes functional epistemic agency. If epistemic agency is defined functionally (by the ability to process information, update outputs based on data, and produce justified responses) then advanced AI systems appear to satisfy many epistemic criteria.

Machine learning systems involve revise outputs through training updates, evaluate probabilistic evidence and detect patterns beyond human capacity. This perspective aligns with extended cognition theories, which argue that cognitive processes may extend beyond biological boundaries (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). Under this model, AI becomes part of a distributed epistemic system. Thus, AI may not be an autonomous epistemic agent but part of a hybrid epistemic assemblage involving humans and machines.

A central objection to AI epistemic agency concerns belief. Traditional accounts treat belief as a propositional attitude involving intentionality. AI systems manipulate symbolic or probabilistic representations without conscious commitment. Searle’s (1980) “Chinese Room” argument challenges strong AI claims by arguing that syntactic manipulation does not constitute semantic understanding. According to this critique, AI may simulate understanding without possessing genuine belief states. However, some philosophers argue that belief need not require phenomenological consciousness; functional equivalence may suffice for epistemic purposes (Bostrom, 2014). If belief is operationally defined as information states guiding action and prediction, AI systems exhibit belief-like structures. The dispute hinges on whether epistemic agency requires conscious intentionality or merely functional rationality.

Epistemic agency involves not only forming beliefs but justifying them. Human agents justify beliefs through reasons, evidence, and argumentative structures. AI systems often lack transparent justificatory processes. Many operate as “black box” models (Pasquale, 2015), making it difficult to trace reasoning pathways. This opacity undermines traditional justificatory standards. However, explainable AI research attempts to enhance transparency by providing interpretable outputs. If AI can generate reasons for its outputs—even post hoc explanations—the justificatory gap may narrow. Nevertheless, epistemic justification in AI remains derivative of training data and algorithmic design rather than autonomous reasoning.

AI as epistemic agent AI systems generate knowledge artifacts without intentional understanding. Artificial intelligence systems generate reports, diagnoses, and recommendations. They function as epistemic agents within digital ecosystems. AI complicates epistemology because: It lacks intentional consciousness. It produces outputs without understanding. It operates through probabilistic inference. Delegating epistemic authority to AI raises accountability questions. It challenges artificial intelligence systems increasingly generate knowledge artifacts: reports,

recommendations, and classifications. These systems operate as epistemic agents. AI introduces questions of reliability, bias, accountability and transparency. Epistemic authority is partially delegated to machine-learning models trained on historical data, often reproducing structural inequalities. User-generated content (e.g., social media, blogs) challenges traditional authority in knowledge production. Knowledge Creation and Distribution Platforms and Authoritative Voices (The rise of platforms like Wikipedia, Reddit, and Quora) has democratized knowledge production. Anyone can contribute, which challenges traditional gatekeeping roles of scholarly journals and academic institutions. Crowdsourcing knowledge aided by digital tools allow collective knowledge building, where diverse perspectives contribute to a broader understanding of topics. Digital epistemology must therefore address non-human contributors to knowledge production.

Case Studies: Contesting epistemic Authority in Algorithmic Age

Generative history and the hallucination problem: Generative AI systems increasingly produce historical narratives, timelines, and factual summaries on demand — yet these outputs are generated through statistical next-token prediction rather than verified retrieval from sources (IBM, cited in AI Hallucinations literature, 2025). The American Historical Association's *Guiding Principles for Artificial Intelligence in History Education* (2025) ^[1] makes the epistemological stakes explicit: "AI texts do not reflect truth; rather, they echo and synthesize, sometimes poorly, sources on which the model has been trained" — a limitation historians must actively teach students to recognize, since large language models "can hallucinate data" in ways that professional historiographical training is specifically designed to counter (American Historical Association, 2025) ^[1]. A recent methodological intervention goes further, arguing that the responsible response is not merely to correct AI outputs but to treat the large language model itself as a new kind of historical source requiring source criticism — describing generative models as producing "an algorithmic cartography of the digitised record whose jagged frontier of competence maps which pasts have been absorbed into training data and which remain silent" (Acnsai, 2026, discussing digital history methodology). This reframing is significant: it treats the *silences* in AI-generated history (what the model was never trained on) as epistemically consequential as the *fabrications* it produces.

Analysis through the thesis framework: Applying Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] conditions for epistemic authority, AI-generated historical narrative fails a basic test: the system cannot be conscientious in the relevant sense, because it has no mechanism for distinguishing a well-attested historical claim from a statistically plausible confabulation (p. 105). The Historica Foundation's review of AI hallucinations in historical research notes that hallucinated content "appears fluent and natural but lacks grounding in factual or source data" — the surface markers of authority (fluency, confidence, coherence) are fully present, while the underlying warrant is absent (Historica, 2025). This case study demonstrates concretely what Suchman (2020) ^[15] describes abstractly: automated systems do not process pre-existing accuracy but *manufacture the appearance of accuracy* (pp. 175–187). For historical

knowledge specifically, this is acute because — unlike a factual query with a single verifiable answer — historical claims often require contextual, source-critical judgment that generative systems are not designed to perform.

Algorithmic systems are trained overwhelmingly on English-language, Global North-originated data, producing what Mohamed, Png, and Isaac (2020) ^[6] term "algorithmic coloniality" — a continuation of historic colonial power relations through contemporary AI design, deployment, and data extraction (p. 668). Couldry and Mejias (2019) ^[3] formalize the underlying structure as "data colonialism": a new social order in which "the continuous extraction of data from our lives generates massive wealth and inequality on a global scale," normalizing the appropriation of human experience as raw material much as historic colonialism appropriated land and labor (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 336) ^[3]. For historical knowledge specifically, this has a direct epistemic-injustice dimension in Fricker's (2007) ^[5] sense: whose historical narratives, oral traditions, and non-textual forms of evidence are legible to, and therefore reproducible by, algorithmic systems trained predominantly on digitized, English-language, Western archival material? Mohamed, Png, and Isaac (2020) ^[6] note that decolonization in the AI context operates on two levels — a territorial decolonization achieved through the dissolution of colonial relations, and a *structural* decolonization that "seeks to undo colonial mechanisms of power, economics, language, culture and thinking that shapes contemporary life," including interrogating "the provenance and legitimacy of dominant forms" of knowledge production (p. 663). Osuji's (2026) ^[11] framework is directly relevant here: her contention that the algorithmic age contests not just knowledge *production* but knowledge *justification* takes on sharper meaning when the justificatory standards themselves (what counts as a "reliable source," what language a claim must be documented in) are inherited from colonial-era archival practices now encoded into training data (Osuji, 2026, pp. 1–24) ^[11]. This case study supplies the geographic and epistemic corrective identified as a gap in Chapter Two (§2.7): it demonstrates that algorithmic epistemic authority is not evenly distributed even in principle, but structurally favors already-dominant historiographical traditions — making the redistribution of historical epistemic authority not merely a technical problem but a decolonial one.

The next case study is deep fakes and the erosion of evidentiary authority; Rini (2020) ^[12] argues that audio-visual recordings have long functioned as an "epistemic backstop" to testimony — the background awareness that an event *could have been recorded* has historically disciplined truthful testimony and provided a mechanism for "acute correction" when false claims were made (Rini, 2020, pp. 2–3) ^[12]. Deepfake technology threatens this backstop function by making recordings themselves a matter of interpersonal trust in the producer, rather than a source of direct, unmediated evidence (Rini, 2020, p. 8 ^[12], discussed as the "backstop crisis" in Kerner & Risse, cited in Villena, 2022). This case study most directly threatens historical epistemic authority's evidentiary base: photographs, film, and audio recordings are primary sources historians rely upon as direct evidence of past events. Applied to historical knowledge, a "backstop crisis" means future historians (and publics) may be unable to trust archival audio-visual evidence in the same way, or conversely — and equally troubling — may find *genuine* historical recordings dismissed as fabrications by

bad-faith actors, a phenomenon Rini's critics note is already observable, since "much of the misinformation" in real-world deepfake controversies "came from labelling real media as deepfakes" (Twomey *et al.*, 2023, discussing the Russo-Ukrainian war case).

It is worth noting a countervailing position in this literature that should be represented fairly in the thesis: some philosophers dispute the severity of Rini's diagnosis. Critics argue that manipulated recordings have significant historical precedent (from doctored photographs to selective editing) and that "the idea that deepfakes mark a significant transformation in the way we gain knowledge from recordings relies on a plausible but incorrect view of the epistemology of recordings" (Habgood-Coote, cited in PhilPapers archive, n.d., discussing the "epistemic apocalypse" critique). This tension between Rini's (2020) ^[12] alarm and the more skeptical rejoinder is itself useful for the thesis: it models exactly the kind of *contested* epistemic authority claim the thesis is structured to analyze. This case study extends the thesis into the evidentiary foundations of historical method itself — not just how historical narratives are produced or curated, but whether the primary-source record that underwrites historical claims can retain its evidentiary status at all.

History, Hyper-History and Epistemic Authority: A Meta Analysis

Floridi (2014) treats "history" not as a fixed chronological period but as an *adverb* — a description of *how* a society lives rather than *when* it lives (p. 4). A historical society is one that depends on information and communication technologies (ICTs) to record, transmit, and preserve data, distinguishing it from prehistoric societies that lack recorded documentation entirely. On this view, historical epistemic authority is anchored in the archive: written records, institutions of memory (states, churches, universities), and a relatively stable, traceable chain of custody between an event and its documentation. This framing is useful because it detaches "history" from mere temporal sequence and reframes it as an *epistemic condition* — a mode of knowledge production dependent on the durability and traceability of records. The adverbial framing, however, understates the *contested* nature of historical record-keeping itself. Historiography has long recognized that archives are not neutral repositories but curated, power-laden selections (a point Floridi's information-theoretic account tends to bracket rather than resolve). Floridi's model risks treating "history" as epistemically settled once records exist, when in fact whose records survive, and whose testimony is archived, has always been an exercise of epistemic authority in Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] sense — a question of *who* a community lets "stand in" for it in the pursuit of truth (p. 105).

Floridi (2014) argues that a further threshold has been crossed: societies whose *well-being* is not merely related to but *dependent on* the successful management of the information life cycle have entered "hyperhistory" (p. 15). He illustrates this with the shift from Moore's Law-driven computational growth to a condition in which ICTs no longer just mediate between humans and the world but mediate between technologies themselves — "technologies as users interacting with other technologies as prompts, through other in-between technologies" (Floridi, 2016, p. 3) ^[4]. Hyperhistory names a real structural shift: knowledge

production is increasingly infrastructural (search indices, recommendation systems, algorithmic classification) rather than purely archival. Suchman (2020) ^[15] captures a cognate point from a different angle — that automated systems (e.g., Project Maven) do not simply process pre-existing accurate data but actively *reinvent* what counts as accuracy or verification (pp. 175–187). Where Floridi's account is largely descriptive and even optimistic about this transition (framing hyperhistory as an opportunity for a "new philosophy of information"; Floridi, 2011, cited in Floridi, 2013, p. 2), critics read the same shift more warily. Byron (2010) ^[2] argues that Floridi's framework, in privileging information-processing as the master category, risks flattening ethically and epistemically significant distinctions — effectively evacuating traditional ethical vocabulary in favor of an "ontocentric" one (pp. 135–147). Rogers (2013) ^[13], writing from media studies, gives the hyperhistorical condition a sharper critical edge, describing search engines as vehicles of "algorithmic authority" — "the belief in the epistemological value of search engine results" (p. 119) — which is a *sociological* fact about trust, not a guarantee of epistemic reliability. The central weakness of the hyperhistory thesis, judged against epistemology proper, is that it describes an infrastructural transformation without adequately theorizing the *justificatory* status of the knowledge produced within it. Floridi tells us we increasingly depend on ICTs; he is less precise about whether that dependence is epistemically warranted — which is precisely the question Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] work on epistemic authority is built to answer.

Zagzebski (2012) ^[16] argues that a reflective, rational agent is not merely permitted but *committed* to trusting the beliefs of others under specifiable conditions, modeled on Raz's account of political authority (p. 105). Trust, for Zagzebski, is a hybrid of epistemic, affective, and behavioral components (pp. 37–38), and epistemic self-reliance — the Enlightenment ideal of the sovereign individual reasoner — is, on her account, "incoherent" once we recognize that consistent self-trust logically extends to trust in relevantly similar others (p. 3). Applied to hyperhistory, Zagzebski's framework raises an uncomfortable question: can an algorithmic system satisfy the conditions of a genuine epistemic authority, or does it merely simulate the *social signals* of authority (ranking, prominence, fluency) without the underlying conscientious truth-tracking Zagzebski requires? Recent work directly extends this line of inquiry: Shin (2025) ^[14] argues that "algorithmic truth" is produced as a sociotechnical output of computational infrastructure rather than through dialogic or institutional deliberation, and that this shift carries "profound implications for epistemic authority, public trust, and democratic discourse" (p. 1). Similarly, work on "artificial epistemic authorities" notes that AI systems are frequently epistemically *opaque* — their belief-forming processes cannot be inspected or explained even in principle by the ordinary user, functioning as a "black box" (Kleinberg & Mullainathan, 2015, cited in *Full article: Artificial Epistemic Authorities*, 2025) — which is in tension with Zagzebski's requirement that an authority be one whose *conscientiousness* the truster has reason to affirm.

Fricker's (2007) ^[5] concept of *epistemic injustice* supplies a further comparative lens: if algorithmic curation systematically amplifies majority voices and mutes others (as digital-public-sphere research on epistemic authority

documents; see discussion of Stewart *et al.*, 2022, in relation to Fricker's framework), then hyperhistorical epistemic authority is not merely a question of reliability but of *justice* — whose testimony gets to count as authoritative in the first place. Enroth (2021) offers perhaps the sharpest corrective to the entire discourse: he argues that what is typically diagnosed as an *epistemological* crisis (the "post-truth" condition) is in fact "epiphenomenal to a more general crisis of authority" that is political before it is epistemological (p. 1). On this reading, hyperhistory does not so much create a new epistemological problem as it *exposes* and *accelerates* a pre-existing crisis of legitimate authority — meaning that purely epistemic fixes (better verification algorithms, more transparent AI) will not resolve what is, at root, a political and institutional problem of trust.

The three positions surveyed — Floridi's infosphere-centered account of hyperhistory, Zagzebski's trust-based theory of epistemic authority, and the critical/political correctives of Byron, Rogers, Fricker, Suchman, Shin, and Enroth — are not, on inspection, mutually exclusive. They operate at different levels of analysis and can be synthesized as follows:

Floridi's contribution is best read as *descriptive infrastructure theory*: it correctly identifies that the *conditions of possibility* for knowledge have shifted from record-dependence (history) to infrastructure-dependence (hyperhistory). This is a claim about the *medium*, not the *warrant*, of knowledge. *Zagzebski's contribution* supplies the missing *normative* apparatus: whatever the medium, an entity only counts as a genuine epistemic authority if it meets conditions of conscientious, truth-tracking reliability that the truster has reason to affirm. Hyperhistorical infrastructures do not automatically meet this bar merely by being prominent, fast, or algorithmically confident. *The critical literature* (Fricker, Rogers, Suchman, Shin, Enroth) supplies the *political-economic corrective*: the gap between Floridi's infrastructural description and Zagzebski's normative standard is not accidental but structurally produced — by commercial incentives (engagement-optimized ranking), by opacity (black-box systems resistant to conscientious inspection), and by an underlying crisis of institutional trust that predates and outlasts any particular technology. A harmonized standpoint, then, treats hyperhistory as a *real and significant* transformation of the informational substrate of knowledge (contra any dismissal of Floridi's descriptive claim), while insisting — following Zagzebski, Fricker, and Enroth — that infrastructural prominence is not epistemic authority, and that restoring legitimate epistemic authority in hyperhistorical conditions is as much a political and institutional project (transparency, accountability, equitable representation of testimony) as a technical one.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer a question that, on the surface, sounds almost quaint: who — or what gets to tell us what happened? For most of human history the answer was a person, or an institution built and staffed by people, whose judgment we could interrogate. That is no longer straightforwardly true. Across the chapters of this study, we have traced how historical epistemic authority, once vested in identifiable, accountable custodians of the past — is being quietly reassigned to algorithmic systems that are fast, fluent, and confident, but not always trustworthy in the

sense that actually matters.

The central claim of this thesis has been that the algorithmic age has not eliminated the need for epistemic authority in historical knowledge; it has relocated it, and in relocating it, disguised it. Floridi's (2014, 2016 ^[4]) account of hyperhistory correctly diagnosed the infrastructural shift — societies now depend on automated information systems in ways earlier generations did not (Floridi, 2016, p. 3) ^[4]. But infrastructure is not warrant. Zagzebski's (2012) ^[16] insistence that legitimate epistemic authority requires demonstrable conscientiousness and reliability (p. 105) gave us the normative yardstick to ask a harder question: do these new custodians of the past actually earn the trust we increasingly extend to them, often without noticing we are extending it at all?

The three case studies developed in this thesis answered that question from three different angles, and arrived, by different routes, at the same conclusion. AI-generated history showed us a system that produces the *appearance* of authority — fluency, confidence, coherence — while lacking any mechanism for distinguishing a well-attested fact from a plausible-sounding fabrication (Historica, 2025). The American Historical Association's own guidance put it plainly: these systems "do not reflect truth; rather, they echo and synthesize" (American Historical Association, 2025) ^[1]. That is not a minor caveat. It is a different kind of epistemic object altogether, and treating it as if it were a reliable narrator is where the danger lives. Decolonizing digital epistemology showed us that this new authority, whatever its reliability, is not even neutrally distributed. It is built overwhelmingly from Global North, English-language, already-digitized material, reproducing what Mohamed, Png, and Isaac (2020) ^[6] called "algorithmic coloniality" (p. 668) and what Couldry and Mejias (2019) ^[3] named more starkly as a new social order of extraction (p. 336). Whole historiographical traditions — oral, non-English, undigitized; risk becoming invisible not because they are less true, but because they are less legible to the machine.

Deepfakes showed us something even more unsettling: that the erosion is not confined to narrative. It reaches the evidentiary bedrock beneath narrative — the photographs, recordings, and footage historians have long treated as direct testimony from the past. Rini's (2020) ^[12] warning that recordings have quietly functioned as an "epistemic backstop" to human testimony (p. 2) reminds us that we are not just at risk of losing good historians. We are at risk of losing our grip on what counted, for over a century, as proof. None of these three problems is solvable by a better algorithm alone. That is, perhaps, the most important finding of this thesis. Enroth's (2021) argument that the so-called crisis of trust is "epiphenomenal to a more general crisis of authority" that is political before it is epistemological (p. 1) turns out to be exactly right when applied to history. A more accurate chatbot does not restore trust if the underlying question — who is accountable, and to whom — remains unanswered. A more diverse training dataset does not undo centuries of archival exclusion on its own. A better deepfake detector does not, by itself, rebuild the social trust that recordings used to anchor almost invisibly.

What this thesis offers, then, is not a technical fix but a diagnostic and a demand: historical epistemic authority in the algorithmic age needs to be *contested*, deliberately and in public, rather than allowed to settle by default into whichever system is fastest, cheapest, or most confidently

worded. Transparency about training data and its silences, accountability structures that name a responsible party behind an algorithmic historical claim, and genuine inclusion of marginalized historiographical traditions are not optional extras. They are the conditions under which any of these systems could earn the kind of trust Zagzebski (2012)^[16] argued a rational person is entitled to withhold until it is deserved (p. 105).

This study is philosophical and conceptual rather than empirical; it has not, for instance, surveyed how ordinary users actually calibrate their trust in AI-generated historical content, nor audited specific platforms' outputs at scale. It has also drawn primarily on English-language scholarship, which is itself a modest, self-aware illustration of the very asymmetry the decolonial case study describes. These are not fatal limitations, but they are honest ones, and they point directly to where the next stage of this work should go.

The path forward from here is fairly clear. Empirical audits of specific AI systems' historical outputs, following methods already emerging in digital history scholarship (Osuji, 2026, pp. 1–24)^[11], would test this thesis's claims against real platform behavior rather than argument alone. Comparative policy research — looking at how different countries and institutions are beginning to regulate algorithmic knowledge systems — would help translate the normative standards proposed here into something enforceable. And participatory work with historians and communities from underrepresented historiographical traditions could ensure that the decolonial dimension of this problem is addressed with the people affected, not just on their behalf. A society that no longer knows who, or what, is telling it about its own past is a society that has quietly lost a basic form of self-understanding. That loss rarely arrives all at once. It arrives the way most infrastructural changes do — gradually, conveniently, one plausible-sounding answer at a time, until one day the old question of "who told you that, and why should I believe them?" no longer has anyone to ask. This thesis has tried to ask it anyway, while there is still time for the answer to matter.

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